





To

Z. S. Bennett,

a most wonderful

friend

from

Algonk

Christmas 1937

THE WILL OF KUAN-YIN

THE WILL OF KUAN YIN

BY

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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

BY

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“**I** WISH”, said the Emperor Shih Huang-Ti to his Imperial Chancellor, “that a great wall be built around my empire, ten chang high, four chang broad, with loop-holes, and every fifty li there must be a watch-tower five chang high. I wish the wall to be finished within twelve months—if not. . . .”

The Chancellor had remained prostrate when he heard the last words of the Emperor; he lifted his head a bit above the carpet, but let it drop immediately. He had understood. If not, then the Emperor would send him the yellow silk cord with which he would have to hang himself.

The Imperial Chancellor transmitted the Imperial Command to the governors of the provinces. “If not” so he himself added, “I shall have every one of you beheaded

who will not have finished the part of the wall in his province."

The governors of the provinces announced the Command to the district governors. "If not" so they in turn added, "every one who has not finished his part will have to endure water slowly dripping on his head until he begins to howl like a jackal and then he will be stoned to death!"

And the governors of the districts transmitted the command to the county magistrates and they added: "If not, then every tardy one will be flogged to death and his body will be thrown into the nearest canal, and he will not be buried in his graveyard in the field."

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The officials summoned their henchmen, the henchmen descended upon the large country which lay along the border; they descended upon the border villages and the border towns, upon the hamlets and farmyards. They drove out the men, including half-grown boys, the infirm, and

the aged, and compelled them to cut stones, and to bake bricks which had to be dragged to the border for the construction of the Great Wall. No forced labour under a foreign conqueror could have been more severe and more cruel. By fear of death the officials incited their henchmen, and the whip of the henchmen gave the labourers cause to hurry. Thousands were summoned. In the cold of the dawn and beneath the glowing sun of the midday, and on until the frosty night, they laboured on the Great Wall. Thousands sank down and died in their enforced labour. They were left lying there where they had dropped. And, driven by the pricking of the halberds and the cracking of the whips of their supervisors, the labourers worked on in spite of the number of their comrades who fell. It is said that hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of dead men are immured in China's Great Wall, far away from their own fields, where according to ancient custom their coffins should have been buried.

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Among the men who one early summer morning were suddenly attacked by the henchmen of the Emperor in Nankou, a village near Kalgan in North China and which can still be seen today, among those men who were driven to the Great Wall, was a young Chinese from the south by the name of Li Wen-tao. His home was on the banks of the Pearl River, not far from Canton. He had come to the North because his father, who years ago had emigrated from Nankou and, being unable to travel himself, had sent him to worship and sacrifice at the graves of their ancestors, and also to look up their relatives in the north.

With a heavy heart Li had obeyed his father. He was a well-brought up young man, just twenty years old, slim as a bamboo and with fine and intelligent features, such as often can be seen in the south. Not quite three months previously he had been married to the sixteen year old Mei-ling, the most refined and beautiful girl in the village.

As was the custom of the country, their parents had engaged them when they still

were small children—long before they could guess what they would be like when they grew up. "The finest bamboo and the sweetest lotus blossom have been united," so the farmers along the Pearl River had sung when the wedding was celebrated. But Li Wen-tao had to honour the old customs of his country. The wish of his father was an inexorable command for him. So Li Wen-tao took leave of Mei-ling—in two or three months he would be back again, so he promised her. Then he departed.

Mei-ling bent her beautiful head and looked after the departing man. Then she went to the temple of Kuan Yin and implored the Holy Mother to protect her beloved husband and to guide him. Kuan Yin, the ever young Goddess of Mercy and of Love, the protectress of women and the fulfiller of all just desires—she would also protect this love. Did not Mei-ling look just like the goddess herself? Was it not as if the young goddess had come to life in the body of young Mei-ling?

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When the workers from Nankou arrived at the Great Wall by the pass of Kalgan, the work was already well-advanced. Thousands of li the huge sinuous snake sprawled over the land; from the ocean in the north it sprawled in wide curves westward and south-westward; now it crept further over the rocks and the cliffy valleys of the Mongolian mountains.

It was midsummer. The stony countryside glowed. The henchmen who were masters of the labourers groaned because of their wretched duty, and they were filled with rage. They gave vent to their rage on the labourers making the lot of these worse than before.

Young Li Wen-tao was not used to such hard work. His delicate southern body broke down under the load of heavy bricks which was placed upon his back. In the middle of the wall, at the bottom of a watch tower, he collapsed, just as the sun stood at midday.

When the workmen came by and saw his large eyes staring like glass into the empty space, and that he did not breathe any more, they threw their stones over him—and the Great Wall grew.

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At the same hour in the village by the Pearl River there knelt in deep obeisance young Mei-ling in front of the image of Kuan Yin. When she arose she knew that she was to travel to the north where Li Wen-tao, her husband and lover, was; she was to find him, and, if he were dead, to bring his bones home. This was the will of Kuan Yin. And Kuan Yin would guide her.

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On a cold autumn evening, Mei-ling reached the village gate of Nankou. She had grown very slender like the twig of a willow, and was white like the sickle of the new moon. Long ago the tender pink of the lotus blossom had left her cheeks. She

had walked through the wide Chinese Empire, unnoticed in her sweetness, lonely in crowds, or when she was among peasants, walking almost as if she were in a dream. Wherever there was a statue of Kuan Yin by the roadside, she had to step up to it and bend her knees in deep reverence, Kuan Yin had led her in the right direction, showing her where she could find shelter and food. Often it had happened that children had looked upon her with wondering eyes and had followed her part of the way, then they had rushed back to their parents telling them excitedly that they had met the heavenly Kuan Yin in the village street—or they had hurried directly to their small village sanctuary to see if the stone image of the Holy One was still there.

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The village of Nankou lay as if deserted. Nobody knew anything about young Li. The men of the village, so she was told, had been driven away many months ago by

the henchmen of the Emperor to do forced labour and not one of them had returned.

Mei-ling reached the huge Wall. She was frightened by its dark grandeur, and her heart stood still at the foot of a high watch tower and she fell down fainting. As she was losing consciousness, it seemed to her that she could perceive Kuan Yin, tall and erect in front of the tower; the goddess' face was serious and her arms were outstretched, as though she were standing watch and would not let anyone come near her.

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The next morning Mei-ling reached the working place. At first there were single workers, then more, and soon hundreds, and finally thousands of persons standing around her, amid stones and rocks, timber and building tools, and there was screaming and such a noise as one would not dream of even in the worst fever phantasies. Like a shadow young Mei-ling passed through the throng. She came to an empty space

in the middle of which there stood a large red tent. At the top of the tent glittered a golden knob, the symbol of a high imperial official.

She made her way between two sentries who stood there big and stolid, staring in front of them without seeing her, and she entered the tent. . . .

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The high official, a haughty and powerful man, sat there in his chair and was just listening to the words of another official who knelt in front of him. On seeing the figure of the young girl against the light at the tent-door as she entered, his first impulse was to jump up in anger. But when the curtains had fallen together again and Mei-ling came slowly forward in the twilight of the tent, he sat there spellbound, and, touching the kowtowing official with the tip of his embroidered slipper, gave the latter to understand that the audience was over for him.

"Where is Li Wen-tao, my husband and lover?" said Mei-ling gently to the official, "I want you to give me back Li Wen-tao."

The official tried to speak, but the words would not come. He looked into the white face and the unfathomable eyes of this wonderful child and his own eyes grew deep and sad. Then he lowered them as if he were burdened with a heavy load, and now both of them knew that Li Wen-tao was no more among the workmen.

"When did it happen? Where are his bones?" asked Mei-ling with a deep, calm voice.

The high official looked gravely towards the Great Wall and lifted his hand in that direction.

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In the shadow of the Great Wall Mei-ling walked back. The ugly working place vanished in the distance. Its noise was blown away by the autumn wind. The fields were brown and empty. Toilsomely tilled by the

women and children who were left behind, they had given only a meagre harvest. Like a stray ear blown by the wind Mei-ling sailed along the Great Wall by the narrow paths beside the fields. Only a few people were still busy there. A small girl came running over the stubble and, smiling timidly, offered her a piece of rice cake of which she herself had just been eating. Mei-ling accepted it and smiled also. With great joy the child ran back to her mother.

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At nightfall Mei-ling again arrived at the bottom of the high watch tower at whose foot she had fallen down on the way thither when she had lost consciousness upon seeing the goddess Kuan Yin. Once more a strange weight lay upon her heart. It was as if the dark wall and the high watch tower were growing higher and higher into the night with incredible rapidity and force. But out of the darkness there appeared large and white the face of Li Wen-tao with wide-

open eyes as if he were calling her. In deadly anguish Mei-ling sank on to her knees and called to the goddess: "Kuan Yin! Kuan Yin! Sweet Kuan Yin! Alas, Wen, my beloved!—Help, Kuan Yin, help..." Then the Wall trembled. At first it gave a cracking sound, a tearing-open, and then a dull breaking, a crashing and thundering. The tall watch tower bent backward and caved in, scattering debris far and wide, tearing down the wall with it in ruins.

There was a wide breach gaping in the Great Wall. The moon climbed high and its light fell on a ghastly scene of ruin, on broken bricks, blocks of loam, and grey masses of mortar. But more distinct than these shone the white bones of the dead—bleached by lime and the summer heat, dreadful in their number—bones of every human limb, ribs and skulls.

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At the edge of this field of ruins Mei-ling knelt. She felt the nearness of Kuan

Yin. She knew that the goddess had granted her wish in this frightful way and had brought her Li Wen-tao, her dead husband. But the sight of the horrible ruins, with the innumerable bones and the dumb skulls filled her with horror and grief. She breathed heavily and tears filled her eyes.

She took up a whitened bone that was lying close to her, probably a shoulder blade, and stroked it with her childlike hand. To whom had it belonged? Her tears dropped on it and remained there like diamonds in the moonlight. She seized a finely curved strip of bone—a rib that had once protected a human heart, and her tears dropped on it—but in this case they did not remain on it to glitter in the moonlight! As if thirsty lips had drank them in, they disappeared into the bone, and it shone faintly in the moonlight. A deep fear overcame young Mei-ling. Now she knew whose rib bone she was holding in her hand. She knew also how she, according to the will of Kuan Yin, could find the bones of her husband from among the rest that were

surrounding her. With trembling lips she touched the bone in her hand and a painful sobbing shook her body.

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The news of the caving in of the Great Wall spread over the country like a fire. People arrived from every direction, old and young from the villages, workmen, labourers and foremen from the Wall, the supervisors and the judges, and even the high official from the red tent—all came hurrying and stood in awe before this miracle. Already early in the morning they had thronged in big crowds to the scene of ruin—but no one dared to enter in. For Mei-Ling was there and she was doing something strange.

Now one could see her whisk over the stones. Here and there she would kneel down, and then one could see her bend over the ground where she touched the scattered bones, again one saw her lift one or another of the bones and with both hands carry it carefully to the edge of the ruins as if she



were holding a relic. The high official stepped through the crowd. With horror he noticed that the right hand of the girl was bleeding. A fine red thread trickled down her arm, drop after drop, over her hand to the ground. With a sharp stone Mei-Ling had cut into the flesh of her arm when her tears had stopped, so that now her blood could drop upon the bones that surrounded her. If a drop of blood stayed upon it, then the bone belonged to a stranger—but if the drop was absorbed like the tears in the night, then it was Li Wen-Tao's who even dead remained united with her. Thus Mei-ling gathered the bones of her husband and lover.

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**T**ERROR spread with the news that the Emperor was coming. The high official had sent express messengers to report what had happened. The messenger had also mentioned, quite casually, for he knew the hard heart of the Emperor, the young woman whom they had found at the place of the breach in the Wall praying to Kuan Yin and bewailing her dead husband. But this had all the more kindled the rage in the heart of the Son of Heaven. To blame the gods! This had always been the way of undutiful officials. But the Great Wall, so he shouted presumptuously, that was his will and his command and his power! He would go and see for himself and find out the cause for the caving in—and then—: Woe to the guilty ones!

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Already for ten days the Emperor had been in the place of misery. He had looked at the ruins. In speechless rage he had ever since remained in his yellow tent. The master-builders and the judges came to report. With deep kowtows they prostrated themselves before the Son of Heaven. "It is a miracle, Sire," they murmured humbly, "only a miracle could have caused it." Then the Emperor flew into a towering passion. "No! No! You fools and miserable scoundrels! It is you who want to destroy my work, you with your meanness! It is you who are unable to understand that this Wall is necessary for my people, for their welfare as a protection against the barbarians who surround us! Weaklings that you are, who believe that I am doing this for the love of tyranny and thirst for power!

All right—you shall now feel my thirst for power. You are to die, all of you, all!" Then the curtain of the tent parted and Mei-ling stood before the raging Son of Heaven.

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"Who, who are you?" asked the Emperor slowly with a hoarse voice, while he stumbled back into his chair without taking his eyes off Mei-ling. "Who are you,—you sweet child? See, I am old, I am more than sixty years old—rage has overcome me,—I had lost my senses.—Are you Mei-ling of whom they have spoken to me, who was led hither by Kuan Yin? Yes? Am I right? Come Mei-ling, stay with me, child." But Mei-ling looked upon the Emperor without saying a word.

The Emperor ordered the workmen to return to their work. The officials and the commanding officers of the soldiers were bidden from now on to be more humane with the workmen. No cruelty should be suffered anymore, and no dead person could be immured in the Great Wall. But for Mei-ling, such was the imperial command, there should be put up a yellow silk tent beside the one which the Emperor himself in-

habited, and the people were to have to pay respect to her as if she were one of the important members of the court.

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The Emperor went to Mei-ling and told her that he loved her. Mei-ling listened to him, speechless. The Emperor begged Mei-ling to become his first wife; she might ask anything she desired of him, and he would promise her to grant her every wish. Then Mei-ling said, "I have three wishes, Sire." "Let them be ten thousand", cried the Emperor joyfully, "only speak! You wonderful creature, tell me your wishes!"

"I beg of you, that you send the bones of Li Wen-tao to his home by the Pearl River so that they may rest there in his fields."

"A coffin of ebony shall enclose him. Ten thousand of my armed soldiers shall accompany him to the south just like the coffin of a great man of my empire.—What is your next wish, Mei-ling?"

"I beg of you, Sire—that when you have this Wall built again, you have a pavilion erected at the spot where the watch tower stood and in it have placed the image of Kuan Yin."

"A pavilion with yellow glazed tiles and red pillars—and the image of the goddess will be of white jade and will bear your features, Mei-ling. What is your next wish?"

"I beg of you, Sire, to promise me that you will have my bones sent south, when I am dead, so that they may rest in the field of my husband, beside his bones."

The Emperor looked grave, "I promise you," he said. "but let us now speak of life and of my love for you."

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Spring was again in China. In Hsien Yang, the new capital, the people prepared zealously for the imminent wedding of the Emperor. The feast was to be celebrated on the day of the first moon of spring out by the Wall, and the whole court was or-

dered to go there. Meanwhile the wide breach had been rebuilt. On top of the Wall where formerly the grim watch tower had mounted, there stood now an open temple of Kuan Yin, which shone far into the country with its yellow glazed tiles and its red pillars. It housed a figure of Kuan Yin which a famous artist had created out of a spotless block of jade and which was a perfect image of young Mei-Ling. Beneath the Wall there gleamed the tops of the imperial tent camp extending far over the countryside.

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The wedding-day dawned beneath a bright blue spring sky. At the foot of the Great Wall, the Emperor with the great men of his dominion waited for the arrival of his imperial bride. In a solemn wedding procession he planned to lead her up the broad ramp of the wall to the pavilion of Kuan Yin. There, in front of the white statue of the goddess, the marriage oath was to be spoken.

At a certain distance from the place where the Emperor was, Mei-ling let her sedan chair be lowered to the ground so as to be able to approach her imperial bridegroom on foot. She wore a light green silk gown, and the silver crown of the imperial bride. Her face was white and sweet like the blossoms of the spring anemone. It seemed as if Kuan Yin herself had descended in her youthful, heavenly beauty to be united with the Son of Heaven. She bent her knee before the Emperor and looked down. Touched by her modesty, the Emperor bent over her. Then Mei-ling lifted her white face up to him and whispered with lowered eyes, "Master and Emperor, — will you forgive me if I beg you to grant me one more wish before our wedding?"

The Emperor nodded without saying a word, "Then, Sire", said Mei-ling in tones hardly audible, "let me climb up alone to the sanctum of Kuan Yin—let me be the first to prostrate myself before her in kowtow. It is the wish of Kuan Yin, my honorable Master."

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Peace lay over the sunny country. There was no wind, no bird song. No sound could be heard from the assembled crowd. Before the eyes of the brilliant court, Mei-Ling climbed alone the broad wall-ramp. Like the small leaf of a young bamboo she fluttered upward. Motionless the Emperor and his court stood. They saw Mei-Ling enter the pavilion of Kuan Yin. After a while she stepped out again. They could see her approach the edge of the Wall and bend over it. She loosened her long green veil and waved to those below. Was it a sign that they should come up?

The Emperor and his court attempted to step forward—but their step was instantly halted. A flash of green light passed down the high Wall and Mei-ling dropped lifeless at the Emperor's feet.

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